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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from INTANGIBLE GIFTS and "THE LETTERS."

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Wendy Ella WRIGHT

Fragment s from the forthcoming novel **INTANGIBLE GIFTS**

A Dancing Doll in a Glass Case

The IMAGICA photo film factory was near the river that ran into the sea near Tokyo. Her apartment building was near the factory and every evening she would hear the factory siren signalling the day's end for those packing reels of film. The other factories around the blocks of apartment buildings manufactured cars, pharmaceutical products and the other necessities of life. All of the concrete structures, when seen from a distance, were streaked gray and charcoal from the factory smoke. Before she hung the washing outside, she took a wet cloth and wiped the film of pollution from the bamboo washing poles on the balcony. At ground level in between the huge oblongs of concrete, sometimes she would pass by a tiny house that someone had managed to keep since before the war. These houses had the old ceramic tiles on their roofs and here and there a trickle of morning glories could be seen clinging to the old thatched and mud walls.

There was no space for gardens, so often Rosanna stood under the samisen teacher's plum tree on the street corner. The plum tree had flowers of two colours - red and white. Half the plum tree's branches had been chopped off by the local council so that it would not infringe on the passing traffic of trucks going to and from the factories. From her balcony she could see the grounds of the local temple and the garden of the house of the tofu man. His shop was made from the entrance hall of the grand old house where he appeared to be living.

There was an old water well in his garden surrounded with a tangle of over grown cumquat trees. From the eaves of his house the tiled icons warding off evil spirits looked into clumps of bamboo grass that had grown wild in the garden.

Whenever Rosanna went to the department store that sold foreign things she was homesick for, she passed by the tofu man sitting in his shop alcove. An old mirror hung behind him and reflected the back of his head that was just beginning to go bald. She would always catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror and in his sliding glass front doors. Then their eyes would meet just for an instant. She was a foreign girl walking in an everyday street in Japan. The mirror and the glass doors confirmed this for her.

The one and only time she had entered his shop was because she had forgotten to buy a special ingredient from the department store. She had been living with a Japanese man for five years. "He is a strange one, that one," the neighbours agreed. "He leaves that young foreign woman alone for months at a time."

That night, she was going to cook a fish stew for the man she was living with. At the department store basement she bought the water chestnuts and the tiger prawns. But as she passed the tofu man's shop she realized she had forgotten to buy the ingredient that had inspired her plan to cook the fish stew. In the Japan Times the article on autumn cooking

had translated the name of the translucent noodles as "white waterfall noodles."

Because the leaves were just turning colour and the moon was the shape of a beautiful woman's eyebrow she decided to buy the white waterfall noodles and some tofu at the shop she had often whispered to herself never to go into. By the time the tofu man came out from behind a curtain painted with river gourds, he had been observing her for some time.

He had then said an unforgettable thing -

"It's **you**."

But they had never met before.

"Do you sell white waterfall noodles?"

"Yes...yes Miss."

He seemed too nervous to be able to say anything more. And then he had refused her money -

"I am giving them to you...where are you from?"

"I am from Australia and I live just over there in that apartment block, but I am going back to my country soon for a long holiday."

He repeated her name again and again as if it were all a miracle. When she wrote for him her mother's address across the seas he bowed very low to her again and again.

She could feel his gaze as she put the 500 yen coin back in her silk purse. He watched unblinkingly as she slipped the purse cords around the wrists of her hand. The plaited purse cords were so soft that they sometimes felt as if they were not there at all. The bell on the cords chimed softly.

She could not tell why she was relieved to be outside again in the grimy air of rush hour. He was just a shy man who had never spoken to a foreign girl before. And he was kind enough to actually give her the white waterfall noodles. The red leaves of the autumn cherry trees looked as if they could be living in the mountains surrounding a shrine - and not lining the streets of grey factories.

From her apartment building balcony she could see into the tofu man's garden. Flowering vines that she did not know the name of wound around the trees that had grown wild. The bamboo fence had been pushed down at one end of the bending clumps of persimmon and cumquat trees. As it grew darker she could see that just one light had been put on in a room at the back of his house.

The man she was living with was not coming home again that night. It was too dark to sit without turning on the light. She put the white waterfall noodles in a small bucket of iced water in the fridge. Autumn was deep enough for the other ingredients to be already cold to the touch. The silken tofu made by the strange man was like the flesh of one asleep, alone in a dark room - with the shadow of the moon across the ceiling.

[...]

[Fragments..]

After the lunch at KIKU she walked down Little Collins Street. Next to the Kansai Yamamoto shop she saw something very disturbing. In the window was a display made from a decorative box with that season's newest shoes placed for effect upon it. The incongruous part was that the box that these empty shoes, placed at such immodest right angles to one another, were resting on, was a box for Japanese tea ceremony cakes. The black lacquer box was decorated with just one sprig of silver kaya grass, blowing in the wind of an invisible river. The box was slightly damaged around the edges, as if it had been on many winding and unlikely voyages. What kind of person would place Italian circa 1950's replica shoes on a sacred tea ceremony box? A person with no knowledge - no respect! She wanted badly to go in and ask them if she could buy the box that didn't belong there.

In Kyoto, where that kind of box was originally designed, nobody would even step inside their own home - even when alone - with any kind of footwear on. Yet these people had displayed shoes for sale on top of the box, without so much as any speculation as to what the box was really made for. In Kyoto, in the Silver Pavilion, the courtiers who had as much leisure as their counterparts at Versailles, would have had runners carry mounds of ice from the mountain tops to chill the only kind of cakes these boxes were made for. The cakes were designed after the flowers around which that season's winning poetry of the Palace contests shot the beautiful women of fashion to be over-night stars in their own revolving cult of beauty and unearthly refinement. Transparent cakes, a technique copied from the envoy's conversation of what was the latest at the palace in Peking, were all the rage eight hundred years ago. The evolution of this cake made it more and more a perfectly unnatural imitation of the perfection of nature with each successive generation. During the Meiji Restoration the most prized cake won the confectionary designer an invitation to the Emperor's Palace. In the story told and re-told in his family for three successive generations now, he had met the most celebrated living geisha of the day. Inspired by her voice and the one decoration in her lustrous hair, he had made the new cake to commemorate that occasion. The transparent cake was made in a mould the shape of river gourd. It had three layers of colour. The bottom layer was made of seaweed, to create an aqua green. The middle, main layer, was a pane of mirror-like "water". Inside the water, made of a gel of concentrated red, rested a camellia. A camellia as red as the celebrated geisha's perfect, laughing mouth had been on that momentous day.

Why, oh why...in faraway Melbourne did she have to see this box treated in this way? It was only because it was all so faraway, she told herself. A woman, "dressed to kill" emerged with a clatter to shut the Edwardian replica doors of the shop. The strange girl who was Rosanna, had been staring at the shoes with such a curious expression for so long. The street lamps had been turned on. She turned around and joined the crowd of people in the rush hour, walking back to reality, down Little Collins Street to where she was staying, at the Hotel Victoria.

The man at the Stellini café had said that The Hotel Victoria had been there "forever." From the facade and the various fixtures which had not been removed or covered with fibro you

could see that yes, it had been there forever. People had been looking through the stained-glass windows shaped like portholes since before the war with Japan. That was “forever”. Someone had forgotten to take away the windows and smash them along with drainpipes that were calcified and too noisy for a 1970’s hotel. It was as if only some people saw that the stained glass windows were there at all. They existed like old and forgotten letters that no one had looked at for years but might tell a different story every time they were read.

The mouse used to appear through the slit between the fridge (no bigger than a television) and the white laminex cupboard in the room without ensuite in the Hotel Victoria. She had come to Melbourne to look for work. She rode the broken elevator up and down to her room that was a sub-division of something that had once been more stately. If you didn’t press the 1940’s brass buttons in the right combination, the lift took you down to a basement venue with no sign. The walls there were red and gold velveteen baroque with two dimmed candelabra lamps. A waiting passage to what? What went on in that basement? Back in the real world of the ground floor lobby the bellboys had said “events” happened there. The few times she had been plunged by the elevator into the basement with no sign, she had waited in fright for the elevator to come back from nowhere again. Was this how people disappeared? By unknowingly going to places that did not exist?

In the hotel room she took off her black high-heeled sandals. Peeling off the tight lace stockings, she turned on the evening news. Getting ready for a shower down the hall, she removed the bits of gold from her body. The room and everything she had been wearing still smelt of Shiseido’s ZEN she had so carefully scented everything with that morning. She put the gold chain into the red brocade pouch. The colour that, traditionally, only the youngest of women wear. The tea ceremony box began a rippling of thoughts, taking her back on her own solitary secret journey to Japan.

[...]

THE LETTERS

Some of the letters
arrived unexpectedly.
Like snow falling through the night.
Some were waited for
like rain for the earth.
Some were as cryptic as a foreign tongue,
and others
as obvious
as the sea’s tide in the evening.
The unopened ones
were taken from apartment to apartment,
to unlikely suburbs
in a zigzag route, across the city.
Those were the ones with a postmark

made from an American flag
printed with the block letters,

“LOVE”

Some were written with no commas, or full-stops
The words running in crooked lines all over the pages.

One had a photograph of that day.

The one in a red envelope

made birds

flying in an oblique path

swerve in a rushing wave

scatter

and then return.

One had been written on an air-plane

by a person who had nothing left

but himself

to bargain with.

One was re-directed from a foreign place.

One had boxes to fill in with ticks or crosses

like a statistical questionnaire -

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ maybe

One had words quoted from a holy book

of an unknown god.

There was one

given in a darkened room

by a man still in bed, with his two outstretched fingers.

It began,

“Because of what you said at the park...”

and went on -

“Because of.....because of...”,

but never stated its result.

There was one which stayed in a locked suitcase

from Finland to Greece.

That letter

compared an opaque shell

thrown onto the shore

and retrieved

by the never-resting waves

to "LOVE."

One had been stolen and then replaced.

One was envied so much by another

that she fell on the knife of her own words.

One made the flowers open

under the sheets of ice.

One was written while a city slept.

One was sent by DHL

and went straight into the heart

like a flaming arrow.

One was written on the rim of a fountain

where people wait.

One was written about stars

flung in purposeful pattern

against the black map of the endless sky.

There were letters
full of songs gone missing
from one never coming back
but who didn't know that
at the time.

Some of the letters
spoke of always waiting
while silver reflections
spilt from fragments of mirror
into a daylight sky
seen from a passing tram.

Another letter
came painted on a paper boat
lit by a candle
at its helm
through a hail storm.

Guided by a star
one letter came through a flame
a flame that never goes out
a flame
named
"LOVE."

One
opened and read
by eyes it was not meant for
was so true
it caused a man
drunk with longing
to throw the readied weapon
through a grid on the city street.

One letter
was about the odds
of finding a jewel
once it had been dropped
into the ocean.

On one
a tear had splashed
after falling deeply
into the letter "O"
of the word "LOVE."

Then the letters stopped coming
And then came again.

This time
the words were a stream of mounted horses
the riders wearing balaclavas
riding the defile the icons of the past
they had built in a new faith
unknown to itself
as shallow and as deep as a shadow.
The words ran like a heart beating thunderously

in white hot renouncement.
The words drew a diagram
of a cliff
across which
was a bridge made of acid rain
and below it
a burnt forest.
And then the words ran away
as quickly as they had come
into an unseen night
of exile and extinction.
The words in those letters
were stuck together
into one drowned prayer
by tears
obscuring the signature
of a forgotten one
in the name of "LOVE."
I gather all the letters
to delete my name
from the envelopes
like a transient
who doesn't want to be found.
I write
"RETURN TO SENDERS"
I go to a red post-box
tall as a skyscraper
and ask a man
to lift me up
to push them through the slot
to send them back
to a place
called "LOVE."

"Him"

with eyes like the air full of snow
With naked eyes
With hair like the night sea
A tongue of water turned to wine.
Him
With a tongue like single stars seen while traveling.
Him
With words made of clouds to the touch
With eyelashes
Like the smoke from burning pines
With a throat of fields of grass just cut
A touch like the eye of a storm
Words like rough diamonds

Like crushed diamonds
Eyes like pebbles on the floor of a still pool
To the eye
like a touch that wakes.
With a sex like
the eye of a storm.

From where
can I escape
the memory of you -
to climb
the pole of the searchlight
on the horizon
of the tarmac,
tall as a virgin's legs
piercing the oblique lines in the sky?
